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AUTHOR Marchant, Fred; Wunder, Haleh
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ABSTRACT

The sources of political violence against Guatemala's rural poor are traced in this document for high school global education classes. The paper summarizes "Witness to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement" (Oxfam America's Impact Audit No. 2). The study was based on 115 respondents, both individuals and organizations, involved with research development or religious programs in Guatemala. They represent a broad range of political values, religious beliefs, and development ideologies. Respondents point out that after the 1976 earthquake, local organization efforts were aimed at reconstruction. When rural cooperatives began acting independently, a government-sponsored campaign of suppression and terror was initiated. The violence is characterized as a war between the 2.1 percent of the country's population who own 62 percent of the country's arable land, and the peasants forced to work that land at $1-3 a day. This violence has worsened the agrarian economy, blocked delivery of health and education services, and caused enormous upheaval in religious and familial institutions. The guerilla movement, then, offers the peasants a chance of survival and hope for change. The fact that to be active in rural society is to risk being kidnapped, tortured, and murdered should be of utmost importance to the future policy of the United States vis-a-vis Guatemala. Ideas for action and a brief listing of reading materials are included. (KC)

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WITNESSES TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN GUATEMALA

FACTS FOR ACTION NO. 5

Nov 82

Fred Marchant and Haleh Wunder

SO 014 816

Oxfam America, Boston, MA

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Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala

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"It took us thirteen hours to reach the door to freedom, by the safest although not the shortest way. Five catechists had secretly come to me the night before. 'Padre,' they said, 'this is more than we can take.' I thought they were right. This is a true story."

Priest in Exile

This issue of Facts for Action is devoted to a summary of Oxfam America's Impact Audit #2, Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement. The study is authored by Shelton Davis and Julie Hodson of the Anthropology Resource Center (ARC) in Boston, Mass. It is based on responses to a questionnaire sent to 250 North American individuals and organizations involved with research, development or religious programs in Guatemala. They represent a broad range of political values, religious beliefs and development ideologies. All were asked to respond anonymously to encourage complete candor and to prevent retaliation against them or the Indian people they worked with. Forty-four percent (115) answered the questionnaire, and response rates were similar for all the types of organizations contacted. The resulting study is the most comprehensive survey to date of the effects of political violence on Gautemalan society.*

*The full report (64 pages) is available from Oxfam America at the cost of $5.00 plus postage.

In Guatemala, intimidation and violence are the government's response to popular demands for social and economic change. Military repression has thwarted all peaceful efforts to improve the quality of life among Guatemala's poor. In Oxfam America's **Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala,** 115 North Americans with work experience in rural Guatemala describe the dangers of working for peaceful change in Guatemala. Their testimony illustrates the sufferings of Guatemala's poor.

General Living Conditions

As in many Latin American countries, Guatemala's economic and political system denies the majority of its citizens access to their country's resources. Three-quarters of the population earn less than $215 per year, making them among the poorest in the region. One third of the people suffer from malnutrition, and each year more than 25,000 people die from nutrition-related diseases. For the Indian population (55% of the country's total) conditions are, if anything, even worse. Their life expectancy, for instance, is 10 years less than the national average, and their infant mortality rate is 1.7 times higher. One half of the total population of the country is illiterate, but an astounding 82 percent of the rural Indian population cannot read or write.

The Rural Economy

A drastically unequal distribution of land is at the heart of the crisis in Guatemala. Three-quarters of the population derive their livelihood from the land, and of these, 80 percent work tiny parcels amounting to only 16.2 percent of the country's farmland. Most of these plots are too small to provide adequate food or income, so peasants are frequently forced to migrate from their highland homes to seek work on the large coastal plantations. These estates occupy 62 percent of the country's arable land, yet are owned by a mere 2.1 percent of the country's population. This oligarchy hires the landless and migratory peasants and pays them from $1–3 per day to produce export crops such as cotton, coffee, bananas, sugar and beef. The large estates have given the country an export economy that has outperformed 22 other countries in Latin America, including Mexico, Colombia and Brazil. Tragically, because of this very agrarian structure, Guatemala has had to import vast quantities of basic foods.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Total Population: 7.2 million
Indian Population: 55%
Rural Population: 75%

	General	Indian
Life Expectancy from Birth:	58 years	49 years
Infant Mortality Rate:	79/1000	134/1000
Literacy Rate:	50%	18%

Per Capita Income (Annual, 1978): 75% of Population, less than $215
Indian (Mayan), $125-138

Source: World Bank, 1980

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Peaceful Development Suppressed

"The people are determined," reports one witness, "to change the system to a more equitable and just one with wealth and resources more evenly distributed to the entire population." Cooperative efforts by peasants to better their conditions extend back as far as the early 1940s when the first rural cooperatives were formed. By the mid-1970s, Guatemala had one of the fastest growing cooperative movements in all of Latin America: over 500 associations with a combined membership of 132,000 people.

In the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake, when it became apparent that the Guatemalan government was incapable of directing the national reconstruction effort, the rural cooperatives began independently to seek aid from the various international relief agencies. In taking local reconstruction into their own hands, the rural development associations suddenly found themselves the object of a government-sponsored campaign of suppression and terror. Here are some comments from our respondents:

"As the people became more organized in community groups and coops, and as teachers, students, and workers began speaking out for their rights, the government felt threatened. The earthquake especially brought many of the Indians together, and they began to realize they had a strength within themselves."

"The government became more desperate in its efforts to subjugate the indigenous people who were becoming better equipped and organized to identify their needs and rights and to formulate plans for actually improving their lives."

"It is apparent that the army and secret paramilitary organizations are systematically killing not only the Indian leadership, but the potential leadership as well."

Such violence must be seen within the wider context of political violence that has characterized Guatemalan society since the Armas takeover in 1954. Since then, literally thousands of kidnappings and assassinations have taken place within Guatemala. Since 1976, the political violence has broadened to the point where it covers the entire country and disrupts every aspect of Guatemalan life. Many of the witnesses said they believed that the violence perpetrated by the government is a way of maintaining the power and wealth of Guatemala's elite.

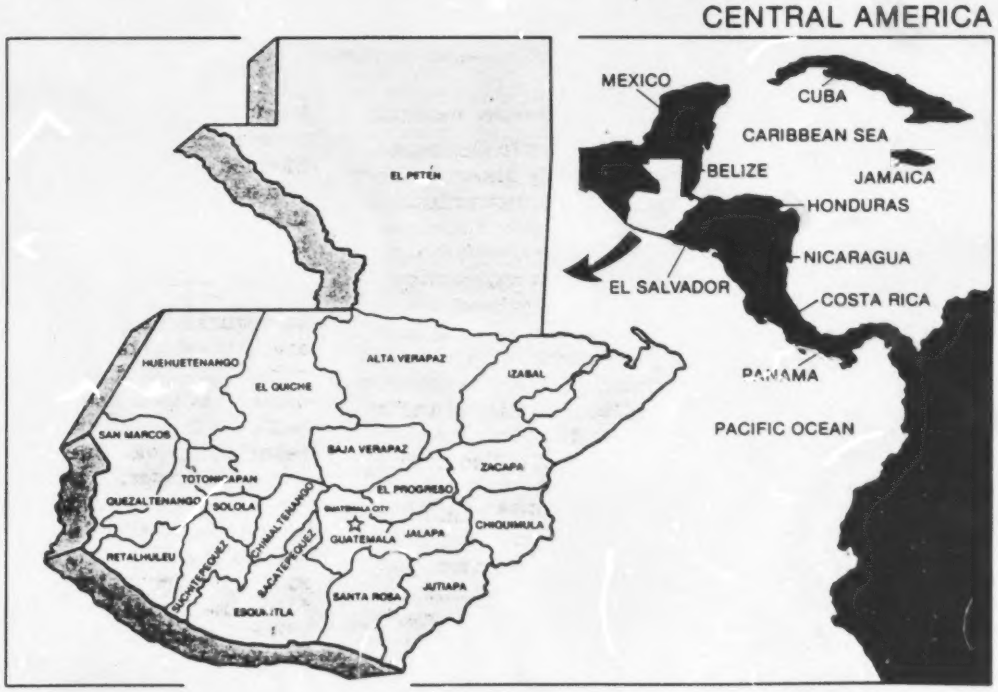
"The landlords are fighting what they see as the final battle in their war against the populace of Guatemala. . . .The evidence seems to indicate that the landed elite understand that their hold on the country is slipping, and they mean to terrorize the populace into quiescence. . . .The terrorism is the last gasp of a dying caste."

Social Consequences of Political Violence

Agriculture and Food Production

Political repression of the rural labor force has worsened an agrarian economy that has always

GUATEMALA



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been on the verge of crisis. Development projects have ceased, fields have gone untilled, and working conditions of migrant laborers have become more oppressive. One witness told of the peasant he had trained to manage the local tree nursery. That peasant fled the country,

"... because his life was threatened. In order for this type of agricultural promotion to succeed, the local men must go into the surrounding villages to perform demonstrations... Since a war is occurring there, such promotion is impossible to carry out because their people become suspects."

Other witnesses recount:

"People in Guatemala are already starving. Now, many fields go unplanted or unharvested because people are afraid to remain in the area where they have always lived."

"Some peasants said they would rather starve than work in the cotton or coffee plantations and be separated from their families or killed after working in the fields. One such incident took place on the coast. When it came time for the Indians to return to the highlands and they went to receive their pay, the manager would not pay them. Those who protested were shot... In total, 16 workers were killed."

Health and Education

Political violence has blocked delivery of health and education services to the rural poor. Witnesses have reported that people are afraid to travel to clinics and schools. Health care workers and teachers are accused of being subversives, and the scarce health educational facilities that do exist are being destroyed. Our witnesses describe the government's "national literacy campaign" as a farce and as a means of identifying rural leaders for kidnappings and assassinations." In rural Guatemala, schools and hospitals have ceased to be sanctuaries for the illiterate and the sick.

"All health-care facilities are running at greatly reduced levels because the professionals, the general staff, and the Indian patients are afraid to congregate in hospitals and clinics. The Indians are also afraid to ride the buses to the centers where the health-care facilities are located."

"Student doctors and nurses are afraid to go to isolated communities, and therefore health care has been cut off. Many health-promoters have been threatened or killed because of their community organizing activities, which are seen as subversive."

"I have seen direct attempts by the army to prevent teachers from continuing adult literacy programs by threatening and beating students... Children from remote villages do not dare to walk far to school in the Quiché region."

"When the school teacher was killed, several of the other teachers refused to come back to the town and this disrupted the entire educational process. Many of the people involved in the adult literacy program were afraid to attend classes."

Religion and Family

The current political violence is causing enormous upheaval in religious and familial institutions, for centuries the enduring centers of communication and community in the Guatemalan countryside. The destruction of Guatemala's

religious and family life presents perhaps the clearest reflection of the chaos created by the political repression.

"Virtually hundreds of religious personnel, from Catholic bishops, priests, and sisters to local catechists, Protestant pastors, and traditional Mayan spiritual leaders, have been kidnapped, murdered, or forced to leave their communities and the country. The army and paramilitary groups have burned chapels and churches and caused so much terror that people fear gathering for religious functions."

"Cofradias, Catholic Action, and other organizations are reduced to almost nothing. No one is outside after dark. Oreias (informers) sit and watch and report. The government pays them $100 for each name."

Displaced Persons and Refugees

As political violence has destroyed the fabric of rural society, few reasonable alternatives exist for the people of Guatemala. Many are abandoning their village communities and seeking refuge in the mountains. Others have migrated to the slums of Guatemala City or to primitive refugee camps in Mexico, while a sizeable number have come to the United States.

"Hundreds of families have begun sleeping in the woods in order to escape night raids. Many husbands sleep in a different home each night. Many families have been split apart for weeks or even months. Families have been split apart forever when parents have been killed."

"In northern Quiché it is said that more than

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half of the population of certain towns have fled to Mexico or Guatemala City."

"The slums are overcrowded and new ghettos are being set up in ravines with cardboard and scraps of tin. . . People are saving their money rather than buying food so that they can make the trip through Mexico and enter the U.S. illegally to look for jobs and safety."

"In California, we are seeing more and more (Guatemalans) who are called economic refugees, but these people are more properly political refugees."

Military Conscription

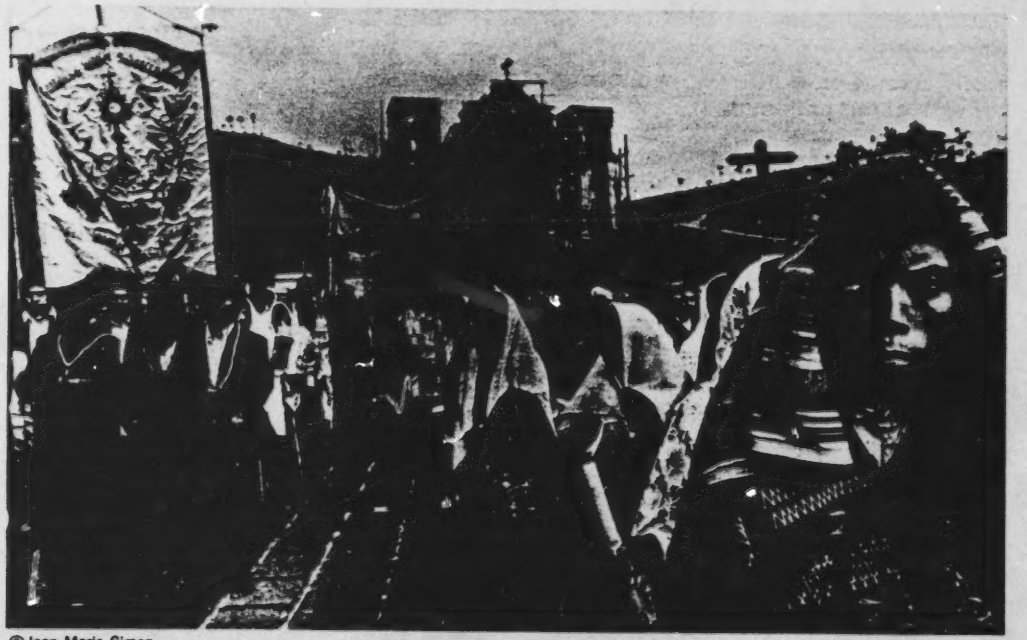
Those young men who do not flee the country live under constant threat of brutal, enforced conscription into the Guatemalan army. As the guerrilla movement has grown in strength, the government army has increased the brutality of its methods of conscripting Indian youths.

"The army will enter a town, close off all roads, and start searching for teenagers. . . All are taken forcibly and after their time is up, they are ashamed to return home and many become sidewalk vendors in the bigger cities."

"On one occasion, conscription took place at a New Year's Eve dance. The social life in Guatemala is non-existent. No one smiles anymore. The young men always hide."

"In the areas of greatest conflict, sons often flee the army. Then, other family members are in danger. The army kills, rapes, or kidnaps other family members in vengeance."

According to witnesses, army brutality leads many Guatemalan peasants to



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ally themselves with the guerrilla movement. To the rural population, the government's army and the guerrillas present very different faces, and it is the actions, rather than the ideologies of these two groups, which determine their acceptance or rejection by the population. For the Guatemalan peasant, the guerrilla movement at least offers a chance of survival and some hope for change.

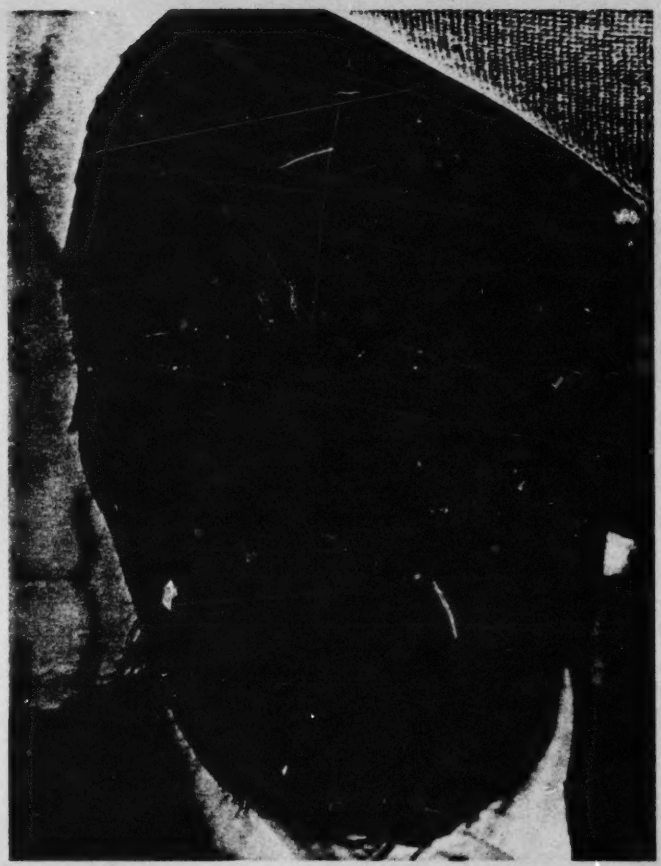
"Many people favor the guerrillas because they respect the Indian women, i.e. do not rape them. The guerrillas also teach self-defense and help neighbors organize warning signals in case the army comes."

"Some of the younger men, indignant over the killings of their brothers or fathers and the rape of their mothers and sisters, are beginning to turn to the guerrillas as their only hope to rid themselves of the army."

"A person that speaks out is silenced by murder, and may even endanger his or her family. Increased sympathy for the guerrillas is a very natural reaction to the systematic program of vicious terrorism and repression that is inflicted on civilian populations."

U.S. Policy and the Future of Guatemala

Guatemala's peasants struggle to survive under a government which uses political terror to disrupt every aspect of their daily lives. Peaceful appeals for social change have brought about only more government-sponsored violence. With homes and lands being abandoned, with handicrafts and wage labor disrupted, the rural poor of Guatemala are being forced into an ever more desperate situation.



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Until 1977, the United States gave military assistance to successive Guatemalan governments. Now the U.S. State Department is again lobbying Congress to renew such aid. The testimony of those who answered our questionnaire should make the present Administration think again. Consider the following remarks:

"U.S. military aid is directly responsible for many murders and massacres of entire villages. It already has intensified the pattern of violence and will probably continue that way. . .We have seen the results of the 'non-lethal' aid that has already been sent. It kills.

"The U.S. is sending aid to the most violent and repressive government that exists in the world today. Military aid will hurt the majority of people that are fighting only for justice in their country."

"I think U.S. military aid is just as wrong to the Guatemalan government as it is to the Salvadoran government. The aid is only intensifying the pattern of violence and creating a great deal of hostility towards the U.S."

"Sending more military aid to Guatemala will never bring an end to the violence. It will only intensify it. The battle in Guatemala should not be a military one. It should be a political, social and economic battle. People's minds are never going to be changed by force, but rather by ideas and social action."

Although the questionnaire did not specifically address the issue of development aid, the findings of the Oxfam America Impact Audit have implications for the assessment and continuation of any future aid to the Guatemalan government. A major finding of this report is that many Guatemalans

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involved in rural cooperative, health, education, and other development projects have been the prime targets of government repression and violence. If there is any single conclusion to be drawn from the report, it is the fact that to be active in rural society in Guatemala is to risk being kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. This should be of utmost importance to the future policy of the United States vis a vis Guatemala.

Fred Marchant,
Oxfam America
Volunteer
& Haleh Wunder,
Staff

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Oxfam America
115 Broadway
Boston, Massachusetts 02116
(617) 482-1211

Ideas for Action

Organize a teach-in and/or show a film in your community about the situation in Guatemala. Contact Oxfam America or the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA), 1718 20th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20009, for possible speakers. Oxfam America has a ¾" videotape in which Guatemalans testify to the violence they have suffered at the hands of their government. The rental fee is $15. The Anthropology Resource Center (ARC), 59 Temple Place, Suite 444, Boston, MA 02111, has detailed information on the problems facing indigenous people in Guatemala.

Write letters to your local newspapers and/or Congressional representatives. Express your concerns about the situation in Guatemala and urge them to support suspension of U.S. military and economic assistance to the Guatemalan government until there is clear and well documented proof, to your satisfaction, that human rights are respected in that country. For reliable and up-to-date information on the internal situation in Guatemala, contact:

Amnesty International/U.S.A.
304 West 58th Street
New York, NY 10019

and

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)
110 Maryland Avenue, N.E.
Washington, DC 20002

For updates on current legislation relating to Guatemala and Central America in general contact Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, 120 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, DC 20002.

Think creatively about ways to make the events in Guatemala more immediate to your community. There are several good local linkages that can be made:

Church groups. Several American and hundreds of Guatemalan church workers have been assassinated by the Guatemalan army. Publicizing these cases can help dispel the notion that the government is only killing terrorists. For more information, contact the Interreligious Task Force on Central America, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 633, New York, NY 10115.

Labor Unions. These groups have met with similar repression by the Guatemalan army. Some American unions are beginning to speak out on this issue. For suggestions and more information, contact NISGUA (see above).

Guatemalan exiles. There may be Guatemalans in your community who are interested in your work. Contact Latino organizations for assistance and advice. Recognize that Guatemalans may be cautious for fear their activities will result in their deportation and/or endanger the lives of family members in Guatemala.

U.S. corporations. U.S. corporations have a strong presence in Guatemala. If one such corporation has a plant in your community/state, you can approach them about your concerns.

Contact the Board of Directors directly. If you cannot, try to enlist the support of the shop union. For information on corporate involvement in Guatemala contact the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), 151 West 19th Street, New York, NY 10011.

It is important to maintain an awareness of the regional nature of the problems in Central American countries. All of the organizations listed above have information about the region.

Keep yourself informed about the region and integrate this perspective into your activities on Guatemala.

Further Reading:

Amnesty International, **A Government Program of Political Murder.** Amnesty International Report, London, 1981. 32 pp. $4.00. Available from AI/USA, 304 West 58th Street, New York, NY 10019.

Amnesty International, **Massive Extra-Judicial Killings in Rural Areas Under the Government of General Efrain Rios Montt.** Special Briefing Paper, July 1982. Available from AI/USA (see above).

Concerned Guatemalan Scholars, **Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win.** New York, NY, 1981. 66 pp. $3.00. Available from Concerned Guatemalan Scholars, Box 53132, Washington, DC 20009.

Guatemalan Information Center, **Between the Lines.** A bimonthly publication with updates on the internal situation in Guatemala and U.S. policy. Contact Guatemala Information Center, P.O. Box 57027, Los Angeles, CA 90057.

North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), **Guatemala.** New York, NY: NACLA. 1974. 264 pp., $9.75. Available from NACLA, 151 West 19th Street, New York, NY 10011.

Schlesinger, Stephen and Stephen Kinzer, **Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala.** New York, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1982. 320 pp. Available in bookstores.

Oxfam America is an international development and disaster relief organization based in Boston. Oxfam America was founded in 1970 and is one of six autonomous Oxfams, including two in Canada and one each in Great Britain, Australia and Belgium. The name "Oxfam" came from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, founded in England in 1942. Building self-reliance is our most important goal. We fund local, grassroots groups in 21 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the United States, Oxfam America works to inform policymakers and the general public about the root causes of world hunger and poverty. Oxfam America neither seeks nor accepts government funds, but relies entirely upon private institutions and citizens.